

## The Challenge of Both

Menno Mennonite Church

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**Purpose:** To explore the power of language and our use of it to curse and to build up.

**Message:** Though our words will always be both challenging and edifying at times, we owe to ourselves to remain rooted in our best intentions always.

**Scripture:** James 3:1-12

**Synopsis:** We have our language rules. We know where we can say what when. We rightly restrict our vocabulary to the particular words that are polite for the company. We do what we can to tame the tongue. But we know that it is just not the red-lined words that get us in trouble. The root, intent, explicit or simply implied, and the meaning also impacts the meaning and import of our language. James reminds us strongly both of the dangers of our speech, and offers the solution that we would filter: asking ourselves time and again what our intent wants to be, and the fruit of our speech wishes to produce. In this, we develop a filter that can help us speak all that we mean and wish to convey time and again.

**3** Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. <sup>2</sup> For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. <sup>3</sup> If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. <sup>4</sup> Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. <sup>5</sup> So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! <sup>6</sup> And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup> For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, <sup>8</sup> but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup> With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup> From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup> Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? <sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

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As wonderful as it is to have a sibling, you can never fully trust them. It really should be in the multi-child handbook that this is a basic non-starter at least through the age of 18. Sure; an older sibling can guide and model behavior for the other; unless of course it is more fun to through the other guy underneath the bus to see what happens. By the time I was 8 or 9 I became increasingly aware that there was in language a red button that should not be pressed under any circumstances, especially if your parents are in ear shot. But I was somewhat adrift in knowing, specifically, what those buttons were and where they lay. So I sensibly went to my elder brother to strategize which words worked and which ones did not. He, naturally, saw the opportunity for what it was and gave me some language and pointed me off to try it out on my dad. So off I went to the fair shock and anger of my father only to see my brother right behind laughing a bit too hard. It didn't take too long for my parents to sus out that my slip of the tongue was more a push than a slip. This taught me two important life lessons: be careful what you say and why, and always be ware of siblings bearing gifts.

This is how we typically think about our language and the use of it. There is a blacklist of those words that ought not be used by in large to communicate what we mean. Even in the current vogue of shading speech with increasing quantities of blue for the value of shock, radicalism, or whatever, there remains the concept of things that we just don't say. And rightly so. I considered trying to figure out how to rig a button to replace the vulgarities with the ubiquitous FCC beep to clean things up even from a teaching perspective. Sure; as people of faith, we should be reverent in our speech, especially where the holy is concerned, and should resist and reflect on the cultural pre-occupation with the profane, if for no other reason than it is not who we are to speak in such ways. We should speak soberly and sincerely whenever we can, and recognize that how we speak to people, especially when we are upset with them or about a situation, directly impacts how we act toward them as well. Throw in some 10 commandments, a little bit of Deuteronomy, and a pinch of impending judgment, and we can be on our way being sternly warned against the evils of the tongue.

The trick is I think our limited propriety when we come to speaking misses the point around the faith based imperative of speech. We reside with the "bad words" approach because it is the most easily taught, managed, and evaluated. But James here in this famous passage is speaking of something of far greater influence than trying to make us cross the lines in the sand, wherever they might be drawn, in saying the wrong thing. The tongue, we prescribes, is the

fount of much knowledge, but also the root of much evil and suffering. As carefully as we may police our vocabularies to ensure that they remain friendly for all ears, there is the far greater challenge—does your speech accomplish everything you mean it to, or do things some time go far beyond what we ever meant to do or say?

The answer is, of course yes. As James is quick to outline for his congregational readers the nature of the advice he is giving. His audience seems to be a group of the body that has formed in the passion of the word, but, with time, has taken on the difficult work of translating the Spiritual passion of the moment into the shared practice of the long term, and effort that is always way more complicated than we can ever imagine. His warning at the beginning of this text speaks loudly, especially for the likes of me: don't teach unless you want to be held, critically, to the highest possible standard. From the very beginning, he is most blunt: our speech is, at it is best a gift of the finest value, and at its worst a liability. One of the things that I like about James is the radical honesty here. There is very little beating about the bush here as he tells it like it is: the tongue, our speech, is and will be always problematic, and no one has completely tamed the tongue.

We know this to be true. Every last one of us can tell our stories of woe around that which was said to us, about us, and by us that failed the better intentions of our faith. It is not just that which is mean, either. Sometimes, it is the precisely phrased words spoken at precisely the wrong time for us to hear them in their best light. Worse still is the deafening silence that we sometimes receive in our most vulnerable moments, the awkward words not spoken giving space for the imagination that is so often far worse than anything that perhaps could have been said. The list goes on and on and on—we know it well because it is the nature of our humanity. It happens where ever two or three are gathered; offense can follow.

We deal with the challenge of both when it comes to our communication. We know its power, it promise. But because it has that precise power for good, it also has the same power to destroy as well. In order to have the potential to save, it also have the potential to harm in equal measure. Any of us who have been a romantic relationship can probably remember the point at which your significant other stopped accepting 'I love you' as a sufficient expression of affection and asked either directly or through their behavior "OK, what do you mean by that? How does that make you, me, us different than what we were before?" There has to be translation from what you say when you end a phone conversation into real, physical reality; sometimes it is a

transformation that can be painful indeed, especially when there is a gap between what one person means by love versus another, and where it will all lead. No wonder this is one of the momentous coming-of-age moments. “I am in Love” is quickly, inevitably followed with “but what does that mean?” The potential for good is also complicated with the details of making that real, giving it flesh and life each and every day.

Words and the powers that they have both for building up and doing harm must be taken seriously, and not just as mere batting around ideas and concepts, but as a call to new identity and new self to be known in doing the words which reside inside us. Words, both those which we use and those which we revere, shape who we are, how we see the world and how we respond to that world. The most basic prayer in all of Judaism, the Shema, states a single idea, the unity of the one God, with a simple command to those who pray it morning and night— Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai ehad: Hear O, Israel, The Lord is God, the Lord alone. It is simple enough command, at least for us in English; simply hear, take in, comprehend the word of who God is. Nothing too tough about this. But what is understood in this daily confession is that the word that is heard, that is present, and that challenges us to change has a power to be lived and to alter lives in ways beyond our very comprehension.

With this in mind we do well to be reminded that how we speak of each other, about each other and around each other matters, often a great deal. As opposed to limiting our speech to the “thou shall nots” of life, we do well to consider the whole. Perhaps we would do well to consider actually including more four-letter words in our life. There are words we avoid less because we find them vulgar, but often because we find them beyond our scope and thinking in the world. They are just so complicated to make work, yet they remain essential to the life of discipleship.

Yet there is power in engaging them. It is worth asking how we would be different if we included more of the challenging four-letter words in our life. Might we think about work less as an obligation one has to undertake for the sake of pay and responsibility, but also as the opportunity we are given to be about the business of God in the world, each in our own way? If we spoke more of duty not as an obligation that one takes under threat of you do this or else, but rather as the behaviors to which we are called because it is there which our allegiance and joy lies, might we think differently about what it means to be a practicing Christian in the world today. If we spoke of Love less as the state of one’s heart and emotions around the individual of

our desire and our empathy, but as the active demonstration of that grace that was once shown us in the very incarnated form of God with us, it will absolutely change how we understand who we are and what we do out of that love in responding into the world. If we, like the Hebrew prayer, would dare to hear and speak our challenging four letter words more often, our hearing them would shape how we embody the actions they represent. The hearing will shape us. And the shaping will help us in the ongoing work of using that we have been given of God to its best use.

We must be doers of all of our words; what we say matters. We will all misspeak. We will all, at times let the chance go by to say what we ought. We will hurt others, we will hurt the body of Christ with what we say and how we say it. None of us are immune to this. We are called time and again to know our power, to use it wisely and trust all things to the glory of God.

May we speak what we most know—of God's love, forever more. Amen.